BLUES HUES

From Juke Joint to Jump and Swamp to Swing, Explore the Colors with Duke Robillard

BY ANDY ELLIS

THUMBING A STEADY QUARTER-NOTE LINE ON THE sixth string of his Epiphone Sheraton, Duke Robillard plucks a twangy series of descending chords. "I love a good Delta-blues turnaround," he says. "The chromatic motion gets me every time." Suddenly he switches gears, filling the room with crisp minor-blues licks that reference both Albert Collins and Django Reinhardt. This sonic about-face comes as no surprise, as Robillard's ability to play across the spectrum of blues is legendary. Few players can move stylistically from Texas to Kansas City to Chicago's West Side, but Robillard makes it seem easy. On his latest album—Guitar Groove-a-Rama [Stony Plain]—the East Coast picker pays tribute to ten of his heroes (Muddy Waters, Guitar Slim, Johnny Guitar Watson, Lowell Folsom, B.B. King, Gatemouth Brown, Freddie King, Albert King, Buddy Guy, and Albert Collins) in a 16-minute blues extravaganza.

"It's a live performance with my band," says Robillard. "I felt it wouldn't mean anything if I couldn't do it in a single pass. The hard part comes early, when I slap on a capo really fast for the Guitar Slim segment. It took me three or four takes to capo my guitar and still have it in tune, but once I got that part, we just kept rolling. I played a Les Paul Studio, an all-mahogany guitar with very bright humbuckers that I could warm up by rolling back the tone pots. By switching between the two pickups and adjusting their volumes, using the tone controls, alternating between pick and fingers, and occasionally stepping on a Boss Blues Driver, I was able to get all the sounds I needed to pay tribute to the different players. Truthfully, 90 percent of it is in the fingers."

To better understand this last remark, we asked Robillard to act as a musical tour guide and take us on a sonic trek through the many shades of blues. He obliged, offering the following examples and insights.

FINGERSTYLE BOOGIE

"For an authentic country blues sound," says Robillard, "you need to play fingerstyle. This passage is typical of slow Mississippi blues [plays Ex. 1]. Before you add the harmony, just get that steady, four-on-the-floor bass going on the fifth string with your thumb. Listen to Robert Johnson, and you'll hear how he'd often mute the low strings to produce a thumping sound that's a combination of upright bass and kick drum. Once you've got the bass locked in, work out the melody and chords on the three top strings."

The dominant-7th-to-diminished-7th shift in bar 2 (beats two, three, and four) is a classic Delta maneuver. Requiring only a half-step slide down and back, it's a potent sound you can recycle into other strains of blues. Robillard plays all the high notes with a backstroke of his index finger, but alterna-

EX. 1

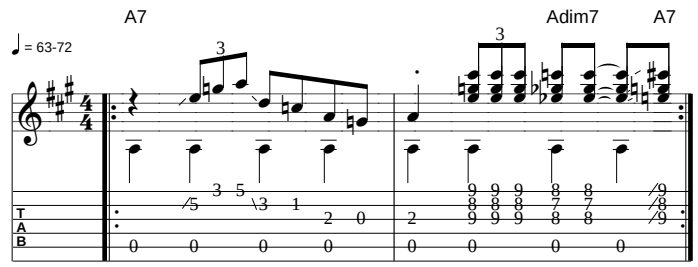
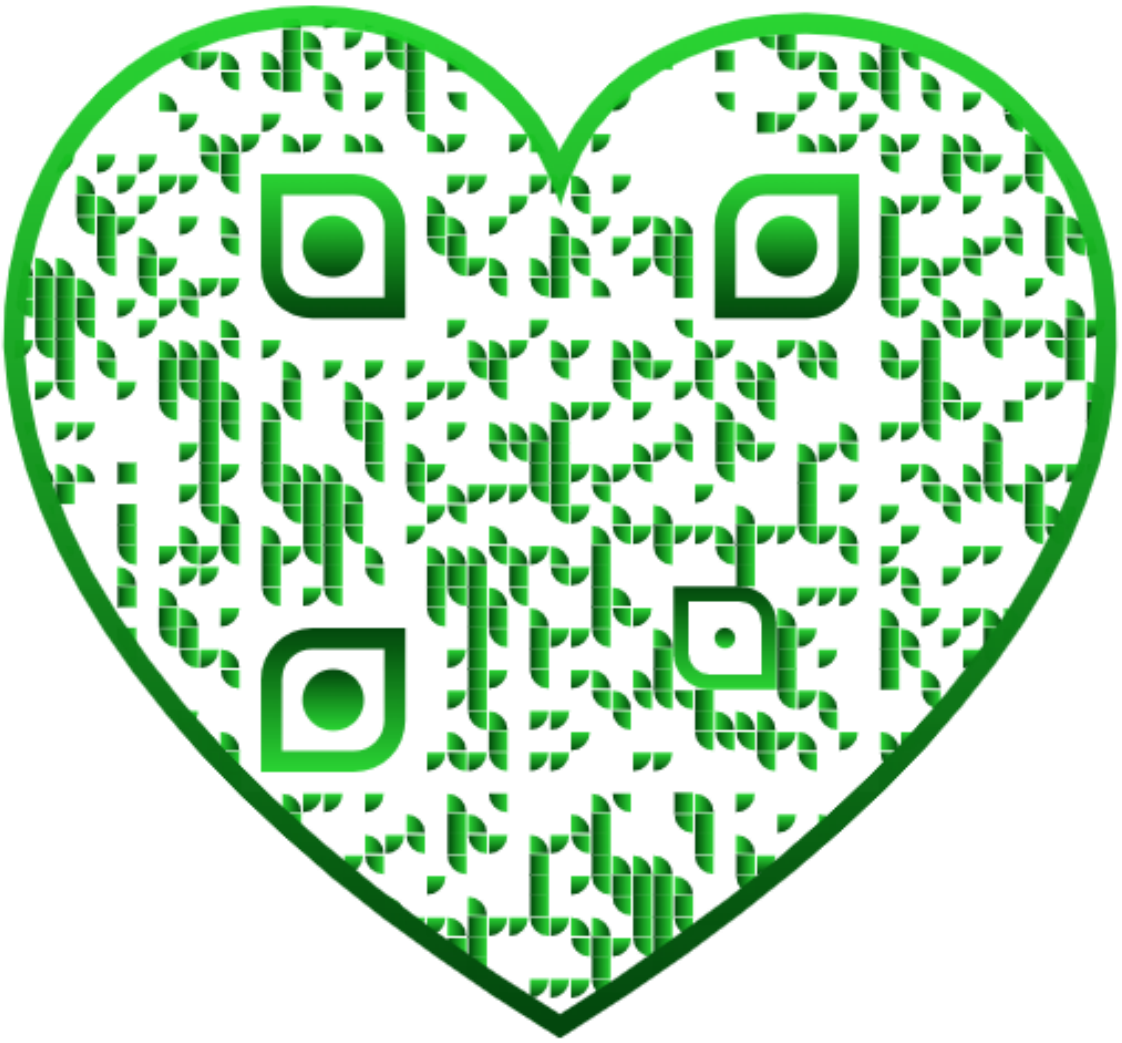


PHOTO: RALF COLLARIS/SUNSHINE/RETNA LTD.



tively you can pluck the third, second, and first strings with your index, middle, and ring fingers. "The more sophisticated guitarists, like Mississippi John Hurt, plucked their strings with several fingers," says Robillard, "but the easiest way for me is to drag my index finger backward across the strings. It sounds like a New Orleans piano roll."

Swampy blues is often in 12/8, and Ex. 2 offers one of Robillard's 12/8 tributes to John Lee Hooker and Jimmy Reed. "Again, get that thumb going first," says Robillard, "to establish the heartbeat rhythm—dum da, dum da, dum da." This passage revisits the dominant-7th-to-diminished-7th shift we heard in the previous example, but if you listen closely, you'll hear that the chord voicing is different. In Ex. 1, we slid a 5-♭7-3 (E-G-C♯) A7 voicing down a half-step. In this case, however, the E7 has a 5-♭7-root construction (B-D-E), which makes its highest interval an edgy major second.

"When you play this riff," says Robillard digging into Ex. 3, "snap some of the bass notes with your thumb by lifting the string slightly before letting it slip free. When it bounces against the frets, you'll get that percussive sound the old bluesmen used to cut through the noise of a juke joint.

"Here's a classic Robert Johnson turnaround [Ex. 4]," Robillard continues. "You move chromatically on the fourth and second strings while holding a high A on the first string." The descending major sixths create a series of chords—A7, Adim7, Dm, and A—with powerful tension and release. To transpose this harmonic mojo to another key, simply ditch the open A string and replicate the moves on the first, second, and fourth strings. The top note is your root.

HYBRID PICKING

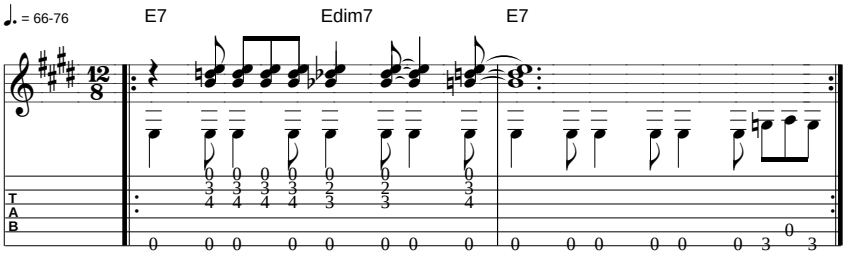
Robillard favors a combined pick-and-finger attack for licks that incorporate two notes on non-adjacent strings. "I borrowed these moves from Buddy Guy and Kenny Burrell," he says. "I think of this as the 'Chitlins con Carne' lick [Ex. 5]. That's a tune on Burrell's classic Midnight Blue."

We're in the key of C, and the bluesy double-stops occur in bar 1 on the first and third strings. The top note is the root, and it functions as a high pedal tone below which you play the ♭5 (G♭), 4 (F), and ♭3 (E♭). These greasy sounds—and the tension and release they create—provide the foundation of soul jazz guitar, and power "No Way Out" on Guitar Groove-a-Rama.

"These double-stops also work over a

"In the studio, if you don't get a song in three takes, just move on."

EX. 2



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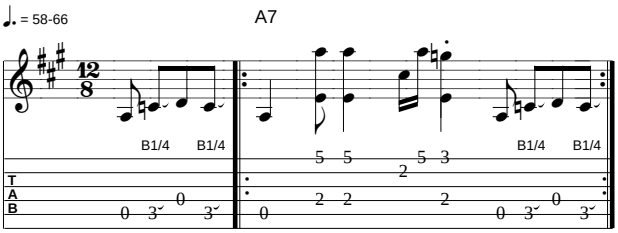

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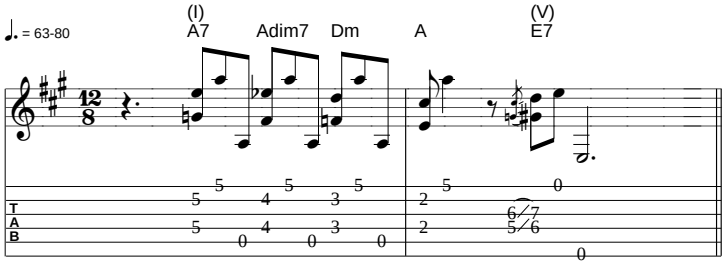

minor chord," says Robillard, picking the soulful Ex. 6. In 'This Dream,' which is in D minor, I play figures like this."

RIGHTEOUS FINGERING

"For me, says Robillard, "the trick has always been to figure out where the blues greats put their fingers to make a particular sound. This goes beyond getting the right pitches. For instance, take this B.B. King lick [Ex. 7]. Sliding down to E on the second string—as opposed to playing E on the third string, 9th fret—is B.B.'s thing. Sliding keeps the tone more consistent within beat two, plus it just sounds funkier.

"Another feature of B.B.'s playing are those rakes, where he scrapes across several muted strings before hitting a note [Ex. 8]. It takes practice to briefly mute the strings with your fretting hand and release the mute in time to hit the target note clearly, but it's worth the effort."

In this lick, Robillard mutes the third and second strings with his 3rd fretting finger, as he bumps across them on his way to C. The instant you hit the first string, lift your third finger so C rings out loud and proud. And as in the previous example, slide from G to E with your 1st finger, but this time zoom back up to A, fretting it with your 3rd finger so you can add a dose of fast vibrato.

WAILING WITH THE 3 AND 6

"B.B. King was the first blues guitarist I heard to use the 3 and 6 in his lines all the time," says Robillard. "These tones make a lick sound so melodic [Ex. 9]. Coming up, he was a big fan of Louis Jordan, and I notice some of B.B.'s riffs are based around signature sax licks Jordan played. Prior to B.B., blues guitarists—even T-Bone Walker—didn't play the 3 very much, instead using the ♭3 in the minor pentatonic box. When B.B. started adding the 3 and 6, guitar lines became more hornlike."

The formula for the blues scale—when compared to a major scale from the same root—is 1, ♭3, 4, ♭5, 5, and ♭7. Adding the 3 and 6 to the mix creates an eight-note palette: 1, ♭3, 3, 4, ♭5, 5, 6, and ♭7. In this A13 phrase, we tag six of these notes—the root (A), ♭3 (C), 3 (C♯), 4 (D), 5 (E), and 6 (F♯). Because the 3 falls on downbeats, the sound is predominantly major.

"B.B. also likes to include chromatic pas-

When flatpicking, Robillard keeps his wrist loose and off the bridge, and steadies his hand by lightly resting his fingertips on the pickguard and strings.

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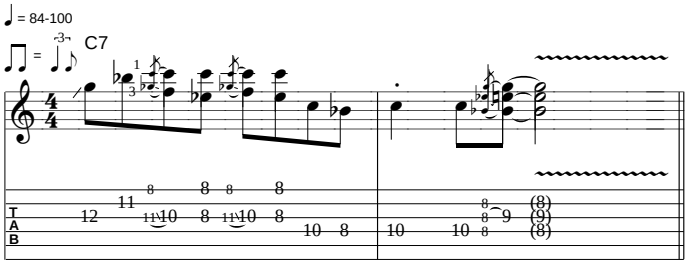

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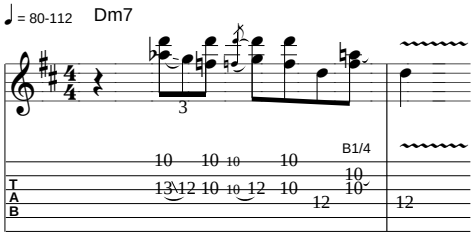

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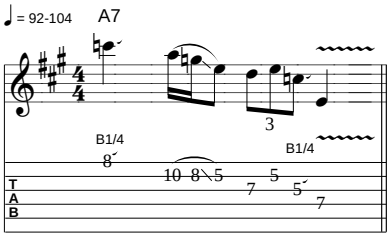

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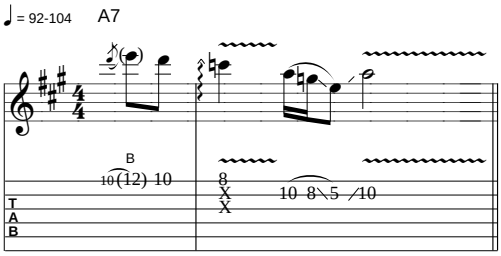

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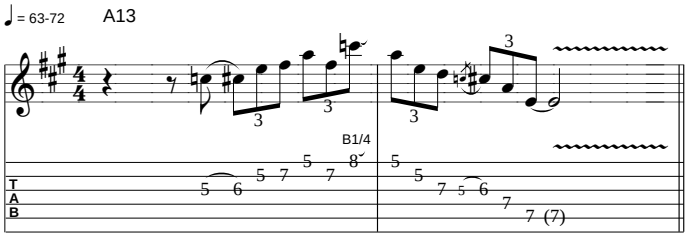


PHOTO: ANDY ELLIS

sages in his lines," Robillard states. "One of his trademark moves is to walk down from the 5 to the 3, and then grab a dominant-9th chord and shake it [Ex. 10]. The 3 and 6 set the tone at the beginning of this lick. In fact, B.B. uses the first five notes [bar 1] to launch many of his solos."

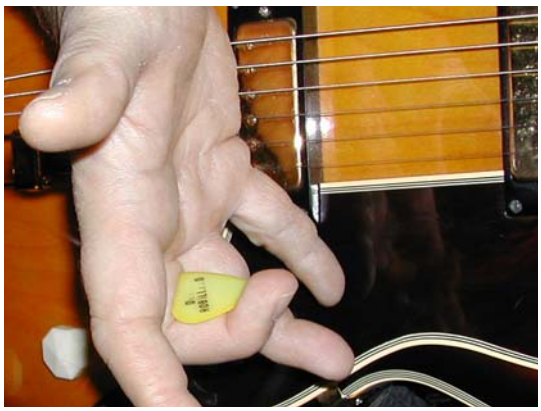
CHROMATIC CRAZY

Robillard inserts chromatic passages into many of his own lines. "Yeah, I'm crazy about chromatics," he laughs. "This is something I might play going from the I to the IV chord in a blues in A [Ex. 11]. After starting with the B.B.-approved 5-6-root gambit, Robillard picks a seven-note chromatically descending line that concludes with a cool encircling move. This encirclement technique involves heading toward a destination tone—in this case, the F♯ on string 4—and then leaping over it to approach the target from the opposite direction, using a chromatic or scale tone as the penultimate note. In this example, the line descends, so the encirclement produces a surprise upward move, springing from G down to E, before rising to nail F♯.

"Swing guitarists use chromatics to create tension and release like this," says Robillard, as he digs into Ex. 12, a hip line in the key of A. "And these double-stops [bars 3 and 4] are essential to old-school R&B and jump blues." Notice how Robillard uses sliding sixths in bar 2 to suggest a D9 chord, which is the IV. This sound emulates the horn parts you often hear in funk and soul music.

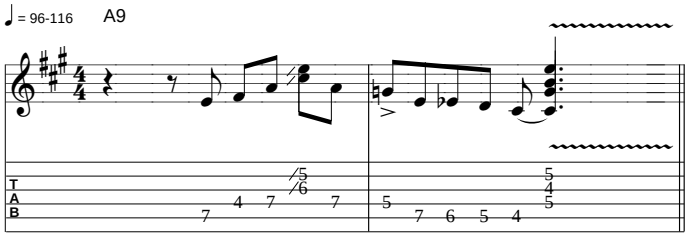
"Sixths are versatile," he elaborates. "Albert King often used a sixth to imply the V chord in a blues lick. In the key of C, it sounds like

To play bluesy double-stops on non-adjacent strings, Robillard switches to a hybrid pick-and-middle finger technique.



Robillard can instantly shift from smooth flatpicking to vigorously plucking strings with his thumb and index finger. His secret? He palms the pick, gripping it with his middle finger.

EX. 10



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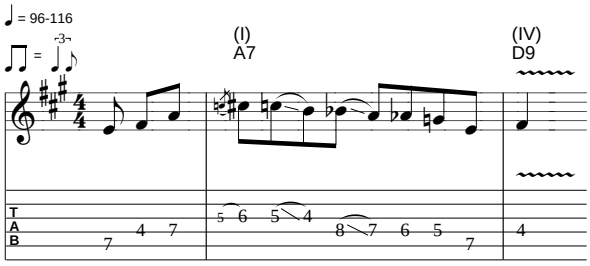
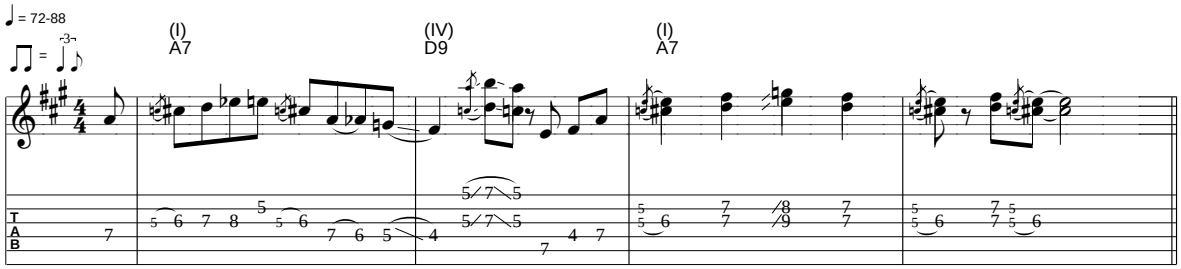


EX. 12



PHOTOS: ANDY ELLIS

this [Ex. 13]." To get the full effect, be sure to keep both notes ringing in bar 2.

MINOR BLUES

When soloing in a minor blues, Robillard doesn't hesitate to work outside the blues scale. "In an A minor blues, I'll play G♯ instead of G, perhaps the more common choice. This is one of my standard riffs [Ex. 14]." There are two ways to analyze the G♯ and the role it plays in this example. First, it's the 3 of E7, which, when combined with the B in bar 1, creates a Django-inspired, arpeggio-based sound. This theme continues in bar 2, with a line built from an Am (A, C, E) and a partial Dm7 (D, F, C) arpeggio. Second, with its distinctive leading-to-the-root energy, the G♯ sets up a harmonic minor tonality. The formula for the harmonic minor scale is 1, 2, ♭3, 4, 5, ♭6, 7. Thus an A harmonic minor scale contains A, B, C, D, E, F and G♯—all of which are present in this phrase.

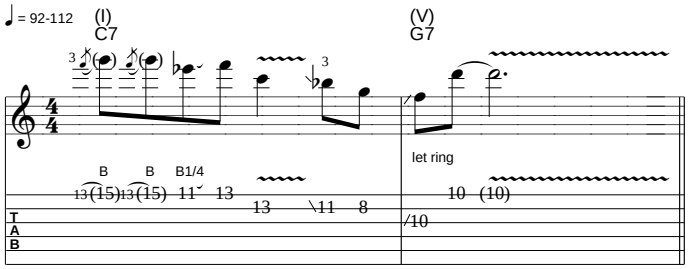
"In a minor blues, I also love to play with the sus2 sound," Robillard explains. "I'll briefly replace the root with the 2, and get it to sustain against the ♭3 [Ex. 15]." Let's zoom in on this: We're in the key of D minor, and the sus2 happens in beat two, where E momentarily rings against a sustaining F, creating a minor second interval.

THE ULTIMATE TEST

For decades, Robillard has delved deeply into blues, jazz, and swing styles, studying not only guitarists, but also piano players and saxophonists. His conclusion? Techniques and concepts have their place, but ultimately, only one principle applies. "It's like Duke Ellington said," Robillard asserts. "No matter how the music is written, arranged, and orchestrated, the whole point is, does it sound good? That's what it all boils down to in the end."

Like many rockers and blues guitarists, Robillard uses this thumb to fret notes on the sixth string, especially when comping three-string chords like this B♭7.

EX. 13



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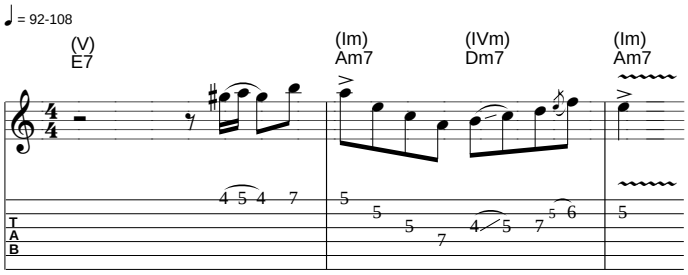

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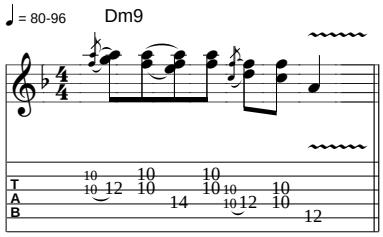

DUKE'S MONEY MAKERS

Onstage and in the studio, Robillard relies on a variety of guitars to set his bluesy moods. "I'll bring an Epiphone Sheraton or a Broadway, one of my vintage Gibson archtops, and a Fender Strat and Tele. I always have a Les Paul, either a Special with P-90s or a regular model with humbuckers. These days I also carry at least one hollowbody Gretsch on the road. In a way, they have a sound that's between Fender and Gibson, with more highs than a Gibson, but the warmth of an f-hole guitar. I put Seymour Duncan or Lindy Fralin pickups in my Fenders, though my Teles almost always sport hot Fralins.

"I play D'Addario strings—you never get a bad one, they don't break, and they retain their tone. My general set for semi-hollow and thin archtop electrics is .011-.049. On a real jazz guitar—like an archtop with one pickup—I'll use a .012-.052 or .013-.056 set, depending on how the guitar plays. I usually string my Fenders with a .010-.046 set, but with a lighter G string. To my ears, the standard .017 makes the G string too loud. Because the pickups don't have adjustable polepieces, I have to compensate in some other way, so I use a .016 or .015. String balance is everything to me. I literally can't play a guitar if the strings aren't sonically balanced the way I like them."

Robillard's go-to amp is a Fender reissue '65 Deluxe Reverb. "My other favorite is a Louis Electric, made by Lou Rosano in New Jersey. He builds different models, but he started off making replicas of vintage Twins. Mine is a variation of an early 40-watt Twin, with two 6L6 power tubes and a 10" and 12" speaker. It has a big, ported cabinet—really tall, but not too deep—that gives me the fat midrange I like."

D&D Manufacturing makes Robillard's custom imprinted plectrums. "But they only come in one thickness—1.14mm—which is heavy. When I need an extra-heavy 1.5mm pick for jazz, I'll grab a Dunlop. For strumming a flat-top in the studio, I'll use a thin pick because it gives the most even sound." —AE

PHOTO: ANDY ELLIS